

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
August 19, 2007

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*Simon says, "What?!"*  
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This time last week, I was in a worship service at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester New York. I was there on behalf of Palisades Presbyterian Church and the broader community of those who have supported Janie Spahr and the work of *That All May Freely Serve*. For those who might not know,

*That All May Freely Serve* began in March 1993 when a Presbyterian court ruled the Rev. Dr. Jane Adams Spahr, was not permitted to accept a co-pastor position at Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York because she is a lesbian.

In response, the Downtown United Presbyterian Church invited Janie to become an evangelist, under the auspices of a new mission project called *That All May Freely Serve*. Since that time, *That All May Freely Serve* has become a national organization encompassing eight regions, all working together to fulfill its **mission**:

*Called by the life and teachings of Jesus, compelled by our faith, and changed by our conscience, we advocate an inclusive church for all who are disenfranchised: A church that honors diversity and welcomes lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons as full members. Full membership includes eligibility for ordination to the offices of elder, deacon, and pastor. (From TAMFS heart and literature.)*

Janie retired this week and passed the torch to Candidate for Minister of the Word and Sacrament, Lisa Larges. Lisa is also a lesbian and has been a candidate for the last 22 years, denied being cleared to be called to serve as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament because she is a lesbian and in a loving relationship with another woman for the last several years.

A member of the San Francisco Presbytery, Lisa continues to encourage the Presbytery to find its prophetic voice by remaining present and knocking at the door with a relentless love that certainly surpasses my patience.

Last week's celebration and worship brought home to me, once more, just how much this congregation and the Presbytery of Hudson River that honored your call to me is at the leading edge of the life and teachings of Jesus in this broken world of ours. It may be that the importance of the radical hospitality of the Palisades Presbyterian Church has become

so much of who you (and we) are – that it loses some of its “denominational and societal impact” in our day to day work with one another. It is apparent to me that this congregation is far from content to be a hamlet church, focused on itself, cut off from the communities and world of which it is a part. Were we ever to become such a place, I have a feeling the music would cease and the doors would close. We would disperse and the denomination would lose a particular voice of the Spirit that has brought courage and hope to many.

This is all true, you know. I’m not making any of this up. “Called by the life and teachings of Jesus” as we are here has made and continues to make a national difference in the lives of people seeking to be faithful and shake off the antiquated, stifling, domineering prejudices that give many elsewhere comfort in their lives, freeing them from the sacred and difficult work of questioning, challenge, dissent, even disobedience, and change.

Imagine if Jesus sought such comfort. Imagine if he never left home; never listened to the voice that called him. Listened to what others told him to do. Imagine if those who preceded him and followed him had done the same.

Or, imagine if he stopped short of “setting his face toward Jerusalem,” saying: “OK, we’ve gone far enough. This is a nice spot to settle down and draw a nice little circle about ourselves and just remain here, just taking care of one another and forget the rest of the world. He tried that once, remember?” With the Syrophoenician woman who caused him to re-examine his call?

We don’t know with accuracy everything that transpired those many years ago, but we do know that there was no retirement plan for Jesus and seemingly little rest.

And this morning’s first reading of Hebrews encourages us to look at this restless Jesus in a cosmic way that has impact beyond anything we could understand.

A bit about Hebrews: Author? Unknown. Sometimes attributed to Paul or one of his followers, but – not sure. Audience? Unknown? Date written. Unknown (thought to be somewhere in the early second century, but not sure).

What is sure about this piece of writing is that it identifies Jesus as the high priest who has perfected the faith by his life, death, and resurrection. He is the key to all that needs to be opened in the universe for all of humankind.

Hebrews is a relatively short work with beautiful poetic language. In many ways, the author describes the Jesus many of us know in our heart:

- a better hope through which we draw near to God (7:19)
- he [Jesus] is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always makes intercession for [us] (7:25)
- we are of those who keep faith and keep [our] souls (10:39)

The author's writings and this morning's reading is all about faith: Faith in the unseen and what is beyond our experiences. It is about the faithful of all times who lived their lives from such a place, a place that eventually led to the intercession of God and Jesus in this world in such a way that faith became incarnated in this man and Son of God. Jesus, according to the author of Hebrews has perfected faith by his life, his teachings, and his transition to heaven. He came out of the world that was just a shadow of God and the Heavens and transcended the darkness, the angels, and more... and took all humankind with him. He was the last of the necessary sacrifices, his blood on the cross making all other blood offerings meaningless. He was and is, according to Hebrews, atonement and forgiveness of sins for all times.

The author's fervent conviction is soothing; a balm in its own right. The gravity of such truth in an ancient's mind and heart cannot be lost on us. Like those before the author who lived their lives based on faith, this believer was doing the same. Faith was guiding the author in the same way it had guided those who had come before and after this work.

The pause to consider this is important. It is important because deeply in many hearts, we would just love to alight in such a place as this writer: peaceful, certain, assured, absolutely assured, approaching a perfect faith, clearly outlined, easily described, convincingly taught, no need to go any further. Whew! Done. Arrived.

The work shortened the space between God and humankind for its times; it spoke to the general belief by many that the world was now ready to come to its end – just a matter of time; that the plan was complete; take care of one another while we wait, and believe: *The kingdom of God is at hand.*

It is no coincidence that Paul is often thought to have been the author or an influence on the author.

But the end has yet to come. The dust of ancient times remains but is out of our realm of experience. The figures of the times are unseen, more mythical sometimes than real, again – shadowy reflections of what was so clear to the author.

We have gone through 2000 years of interpretations, revisions, discoveries: archaeological, linguistic, spiritual, revelatory – and with each one, something we thought was sure has become a little less so; something we once believed as certain as those that once believed the earth to be flat, have now found themselves curved a bit – like the light that was once thought to travel through space and time in a rigid, unwavering straight angle from point-to-point. It is natural to long for certainty, especially in matters of eternity.

While a more confusing world today; it is also, in some ways, a bit softer. In both ways it is definitely more upsetting to those who wish to control the message and the truth, neatly, in an organized and – for those so inclined – faithful way.

I began by talking about my trip to Rochester. Just about this time last week during worship, I offered the Children's Message. It was centered on the game Simon Says. Accessible to the children as well as the adults, the message moved to a point where someone had broken the rule of not following Simon's directions because it was clear to them that Simon was telling them to do something wrong – in this case break an object: one of these [held up small figurine].

Resisting all pressure to play by the rules, all the voices of those insisting that you had to do what you were told to do – the individual refused and those in the game gathered around him, protecting him from Simon and his unacceptable demands.

They might as well have said, "Simon says, What?! What, Simon? Are you crazy?!"

The lesson went on, talking about what to do when you are asked to do something that is wrong, even if that someone who is insistent is strong, powerful, respected – and threatening retribution. The adults got the connection to Janie, the risks she and many churches have taken, continuing today in the progressive movement for inclusion that finds itself struggling with a Simon of a Constitution. A constitution many feel is wrong and unjust and cannot be followed. *That All May Freely Serve* and this congregation encapsulates that struggle and the courage that it takes to stand fast, say "What?!", and live into their faith regardless of the consequences, trusting in the Spirit, the teachings of Jesus, and the God who created us *all*.

I continue to believe that it is exactly this type of eternal justice that Jesus lived and died for, teaching us to do the same.

Luke's reading this morning, which has a parallel in Matthew – with references to the unknown source we refer to as Q, gives some idea of what type of disruption living into faithfulness can cause to the broader society, comfortable in its ways. From the reading of Luke:

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

To the ancients, fire meant change. I think it's easy to see why, considering how fire does alter things. The reference to baptism is clearly a reference to Jesus' death. And I think it is interesting that there is an acknowledgment of the stress all of this had on Jesus and those around him. The writer of Luke makes it clear that the paradox of the peacemaker was known even then: Those working for peace often stir up conflict in the process.

Towards the end of the reading, the reference to the hypocrites from the Greek *hypokrisis* for "pretender," is often thought to refer to the fact that those leaders of the time knew what was happening and could see it just as well as they could see the change in the weather, but they refused to acknowledge what needed to be changed, preferring to

remain in their own denial. Standing by, watching the wrongs, the marginalization, oppression, and violence – and not seeing a thing.

Sort of like Sergeant Schultz of the desert!

Well, Jesus called them out by reaching into their comfortable domineering lives in a way that frightened them so much -- that they ultimately executed him.

I have always said that Christianity is a risky business, calling those who follow the teachings of Jesus (as with other great prophetic leaders) to places that call for sacrifice in many ways. Yet, it is the way of faith to do such things – believing in the unseen often beyond our experiences and leaning into such a place, willing to take the risk, bucking the trend, letting go of comfort, seeing others – *really seeing others* and reaching out to them because it is what Jesus did and what we who follow are called to do.

As we say, “Thank you to Janie and Godspeed in retirement,” we now call forward others like Lisa to lead, to step into the same prophetic, courageous place that demands reliance on what is unseen and, in many ways, unexperienced. Our prayers go with Janie and Lisa and all others who work to bring the Kindom of God closer to this shadowy place in which we live.

*Postscript:* In the time I have remaining here, you will hear me say it more than once that this congregation takes the risks, with such grace and faithfulness that it is almost taken for granted. You are the faithful that Hebrews wrote of; you are the fire that Jesus has kindled; and you, I believe, are called to continue to say. “No!” to Simon when Simon simply cannot be followed. It is what makes us who we are and carries us beyond these four walls.

God bless you and Godspeed to you all.

Amen